

I dream of definitions: Shaping the future through a shared vocabulary of learning and teaching

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Why definitions?

(or, isn't this the most boring topic anyone could imagine?)

Terminology is often neglected, or even invisible, as a topic in online learning and teaching scholarship.

We are (understandably) often more concerned with *action* and *output*, but forget at our peril that action is underpinned by *understanding* (be it whole or incomplete, fixed or evolving), which itself is informed by *language*.

language -> understanding -> action

Definitions can both represent and shape shared understandings essential to both continuity and change.

A shared vocabulary of learning and teaching can shape action at the institutional level – while the absence can make coherent strategic change difficult.

(It can also shape action by enhancing the development of new norms, which in turn may require new definitions.)

action -> understanding -> language

Shaping the future at UTAS

The development of the *Technology Enhanced Learning and Teaching White Paper 2014-2018* sought to examine the TELT environment and UTAS' strategic agenda within it.

In doing so, it soon became evident that there was a far from universal understanding of the concepts and terms underpinning the paper across UTAS – and even within the White Paper working party itself.

For example **“flexible delivery”** was variously used or understood to describe:

- Distance units using **mail-out resource packs**
- **Different versions of a unit** delivered to online and on campus cohorts
- On campus units offered on **multiple campuses**
- Units using **blended learning** strategies.

(How would you define **“flexible delivery”**? Would your definition match your colleagues'? Would it match actual practices...?)

Decision:

To ensure consistency and clarity in both development and interpretation, a glossary of terms would be added to the White Paper as an appendix.

Spoiler:

A document that began life as quickly-pulled together reference document ultimately raised - and helped answer - questions fundamental to the core of TELT at UTAS.

**Which terms
should be
privileged for
inclusion?**

**Which terms will
be excluded, and
why?**

**How will we
deal with
legacy
terminology?**

Issues and questions

**Should definitions
represent current or
future/desired application
of terms?**

**Is it possible to find
consensus in meaning
and/or application?**

Examining these issues forced us to articulate:

what TELT means at UTA

**the practical and pedagogical
components that will inform it**

**the modes and models of L&T that we
are moving towards and those we are
leaving behind**

why this shift needs to take place

Answering these questions helped:

Underscore the need for forward-looking central vision in a shifting landscape ->

Cement our role in setting a deliberate, strategic agenda to inform practice ->

Set the foundations for ongoing conversations about what TELT means at UTAS both at the institutional and the individual level ->

Most significantly, these conversations enabled the co-emergence of a fully articulated blended learning model for institution-wide implementation that will form the core of TELT at UTAS.

Where to from here?

The success of the new blended learning model, and the success of the newly standardised terminology, will depend almost wholly on **staff engagement** for success.

Both will require an ongoing **examination** of and **response** to their context to remain relevant, and both will require significant support and resourcing to be fully implemented across **policy, practice** and **publication**.

Like dealing with legacy terms, the new model will likely uncover and come in conflict with **legacy practices**. Will a shared vocabulary of learning and teaching enable a more successful implementation of **institution-wide change**? With the White Paper passed by Academic Senate we're about to find out – tune in next year to hear what we discover!

References

Brown, N., Kregor, G., and G. Williams. (2013) *Technology Enhanced Learning and Teaching White Paper 2014-2018*. Hobart: University of Tasmania.

All definitions from: Yallop, C. (2005) *Macquarie Dictionary* (4th Edition). Retrieved from <http://www.credoreference.com/entry/macqdict/definition>